

# Opinion: Two American holidays are not being taught about truthfully

By David Cutler, PBSNewshour, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.22.17

Word Count **853**

Level **1050L**



Kindergarten students wearing costumes depicting Native Americans and Pilgrims eat during a Thanksgiving eve lunch. Photo from Getty.

On ABC’s hit sitcom “Black-ish,” Dre, a charismatic dad played by Anthony Anderson, is upset over his children’s performance in a school play. Christopher Columbus is the focus of the play.

Dre’s daughter, dressed as a Native American, recites the jingle, “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” His son, with a welcoming smile, says, “I’m Christopher Columbus, and I discovered America.”

Dre objects, saying, “Fake history, right?” The kids break into a fantasy scene to rap about what actually happened. “Everything you know about Columbus is a joke,” Dre’s daughter sings. “He didn’t discover America — prepare to get woke.”

My students in American History felt “woke” after reading about Columbus in author James W. Loewen’s book, “Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.” Not only did Columbus never set foot in the United States, they learn, but he also wasn’t the first to discover that the world was round. The ancient Greeks beat him to the punch by about 2,000 years.

It’s fair to give Columbus credit for opening our hemisphere to Western Europe. However, Leif Erikson, the Norse explorer, likely landed in present-day Canada hundreds of years earlier. That’s just the tip of the iceberg as to who in the “Old World” crossed the Atlantic first.

Many teachers, students and institutions are reconsidering how to evaluate Columbus and other figures like him who have been revered in the past. Take it from Eric H. Shed, who leads a program to teach teachers at Harvard University.

“I think it’s a part of a general shift in the way in which we teach history, to question the past and not accept it as fact,” Shed told me. He also supports recent efforts to remove Confederate monuments. That and national discussions about being inclusive are helping to bring about such welcome change, he feels. Being inclusive can mean welcoming all kinds of people.

## **Questioning Columbus**

My students felt betrayed that throughout their elementary and middle school years, teachers had pushed a fake narrative about Columbus. Or they had done little to correct the record.

“I’ve been tricked into honoring and celebrating this vile human being my whole life,” said one student. He pointed to evidence to back up his claim.

During his first voyage, Columbus kidnapped some American Indians to bring back to Spain. “I could conquer the whole of them with 50 men, and govern them as I pleased,” he wrote in his journal. It’s worth noting that the native people Columbus saw in the Bahamas were largely friendly toward the visitors. On his second voyage, in 1493, Columbus allowed his men to abuse native women.

As punishment for populations who did not supply enough gold, Columbus supported cutting off limbs and war. Explorers like Hernando Cortés and Francisco Pizarro laid waste to the Aztec and Incan empires in their search for riches.

For his view on how to teach about Columbus, I spoke with Loewen. He told me, “You might point out that he is the only guy who gets a named holiday, except for this guy named Martin Luther King, Jr., who tried to remove some of the vestiges of slavery. And here with Columbus, you have the guy who started the transatlantic slave trade.”

When teaching younger children about Columbus, certain details should be left out. Still, we fail students when we celebrate Columbus' courage without noting his wrongdoing. For any ages, consider asking students why they think cities and states are adopting Indigenous Peoples' Day on the holiday reserved for Columbus Day. Indigenous people are native to the land.

I asked Shed for his thoughts. "I would be concerned with any teacher who doesn't help their kids question the past," he said, recommending they direct students toward evidence and interpretation to help assess the past.

## **The Thanksgiving Story Vs. History**

If you're a teacher who may want to change how you teach history, keep in mind that Thanksgiving is right around the corner.

Reconsider the way teachers often start their lesson: how in 1620, the Mayflower landed in Massachusetts, carrying Europeans seeking to escape religious persecution.

Instead, describe how several years before the Pilgrims arrived, a horrific disease had claimed countless native lives near Plymouth. The Europeans had arrived ill-prepared for the upcoming winter. For survival, they resorted to robbing corn buried with the dead.

"Thanksgiving is full of embarrassing facts. The Pilgrims did not introduce the Native Americans to the tradition; Eastern Indians had observed autumnal harvest celebrations for centuries," Loewen writes in his book, also noting that our modern celebration dates back to 1863, during the Civil War. "Pilgrims," he continues, "had nothing to do with it," and "no one used the term Pilgrims until the 1870s."

I leave it to my students to decide if on Thanksgiving they find it appropriate to share what they are thankful for. However, I also ask them to consider why many Native Americans use this date as a National Day of Mourning.

However you go about teaching these two holidays, remember to include the bad along with the good. Otherwise, you're lying to your students.